

Remarks of Jim Rex

State Superintendent of Education
Senate K-12 Subcommittee Meeting

April 23, 2009

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you this morning.

First, I'd like to express my appreciation to senators Hayes, Courson, Malloy, Scott and Knotts for sponsoring Senate Bill 607, the Public School Choice Program Act. As you know, similar legislation was passed by big bipartisan majorities in both the House and Senate two years ago, but fell just a few votes short of overriding Governor Sanford's veto.

It's significant that even though that legislation didn't pass the first time around, public schools across South Carolina went right out and proved their commitment to its basic principles. They immediately began to expand the number and variety of instructional choices they offered to students and their parents. And today, nearly 60,000 students are enrolled in some sort of a choice program in a South Carolina public school.

South Carolina has more than 200 single-gender programs. In fact, one of every three single-gender programs in the nation is right here in South Carolina.

We have more than 170 public school Montessori classrooms, and we expect a 10 percent increase next year. Charter schools are also seeing significant growth. In fact, if all of our expected charter applications are approved and open by 2010-2011, we will have doubled the number of charter schools in just two years. Nearly 6,000 students will take an on-line course this year in our new South Carolina Virtual School.

Students enrolled in public school choice programs

<i>Charter schools</i>	<i>7,000</i>
<i>Single-gender</i>	<i>27,500</i>
<i>Montessori</i>	<i>3,500</i>
<i>Middle/early college</i>	<i>1,350</i>
<i>Environmental education</i>	<i>2,000</i>
<i>Academic magnets</i>	<i>6,000</i>
<i>International Baccalaureate</i>	<i>1,575</i>
<i>Alternative</i>	<i>5,000</i>
<i>E-learning</i>	<i>5,700</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>59,625</i>

These are meaningful choices for students and parents in schools that are fully accountable to the public for their academic performance, fully accountable and transparent to the public for their finances, and fully accessible to the public in terms of their admissions policies.

S.607 is aimed at accelerating the expansion of these choices and ensuring that public school choice doesn't become a philosophy that is embraced in some districts and avoided in others. It will ensure that every school district in South Carolina develops instructional options for students and parents.

So I'm happy to be here this morning to talk about public school choice. I'm unhappy, though, to be part of yet another discussion about an idea that won't serve our state – an idea that will make us, as a people, more separate and more unequal.

At a time when our entire nation is focusing on transforming public education, at a time when Bill Gates and Warren Buffet and nonprofit foundations are infusing private dollars into public schools, here in South Carolina we're continuing to talk about taking public money and sending it to private schools.

That's an idea that's thoroughly out of step with the vast majority of states. In fact, even the few states that have embarked on voucher/tax credit experiments don't have anything as radical as the experiment being proposed in Senate Bill 520.

The reason this idea hasn't swept the nation is that our citizens oppose it. Nationwide, 10 states have held statewide votes on vouchers and tax credits, and every single time the idea has been defeated in a landslide. The most recent one was two years ago in Utah, a very conservative state with a Republican governor and a Republican-controlled legislature. When the legislature passed a voucher bill by a single vote, Utah citizens used a petition drive to force a statewide vote where vouchers were defeated by a 2-1 margin.

In 2000, vouchers were defeated 2-1 in Michigan. The same year, they were defeated nearly 4-1 in California.

This bill would create two school systems: one that's fully accountable to the public for academic performance and financial performance, and one that's not. One school system that's fully accessible to every student, and one that can pick and choose which students it wants to accept.

The public accountability provisions in this bill are a mirage, and that's not an insignificant little detail. It's a fatal flaw, particularly if you happen to be a parent shopping for a private school.

- You won't be able to compare test scores of the private school you're evaluating with public schools – or even with other private schools – because they'll be using different standardized tests.
- You won't know if the school you're evaluating will still be in business next month because its audits and financial information aren't available for public inspection. It could be days away from financial collapse, and you won't know until it's too late and your money is gone.
- You won't know immediately if your child will be admitted at the private school you're evaluating. If your child has bad grades, or if your child has had discipline issues in the past, your child can be denied admission. In fact, your child can be denied admission for any reason whatsoever. The private school you "choose" doesn't have to choose you.

They shouldn't be forced to choose you. Their admissions criteria should be whatever they want them to be, because they're private schools. They shouldn't have to make their test scores or expenditures public, because they're private schools.

But once a private school decides to accept public funding, the rules change. They must become transparent about how they do business, and the public has a right to hold them accountable for effectively they do business.

We all know the challenges that our public schools face, and poverty is perhaps our biggest challenge. More than half of our schools have at least 70 percent of their students living in poverty. A quarter of our schools have at least 90 percent of their students living in poverty.

Perhaps the most disturbing thing to me about this whole discussion is the way S.520 supporters are trying to sell their bill as salvation for low-income families. You and I know that this just isn't true. Low-income families won't get any help from tax credits, and only a few low-income families will have any hope of getting full-tuition "scholarships" – if that kind of assistance actually becomes available. And as I said before, if students have poor grades or discipline issues, private schools can refuse to admit them.

Even if a family were to get their student's full private school tuition paid up front, that family will still have to find additional money to pay for things that public schools supply for free: transportation to school and back home again; free breakfasts; free lunches; and waivers from additional school fees that other students have to pay. Will private schools offer to pay all of the additional costs that "scholarships" don't cover?

The ironic thing is this: If businesses or individuals want to help low-income students attend private school, they can do it now under our existing tax laws. They can get deductions for donations they make to foundations that support private schools.

But I want to emphasize that this is not a debate between critics of public schools and supporters of public schools. While I certainly support public schools, I'm also a critic who thinks that the status quo is unacceptable. If I thought everything was going wonderfully, I never would have run for State Superintendent of Education. And I would not have led a statewide movement to expand the number and variety of choices in public schools.

I also want to make it very clear that I am not opposed to private schools. I've supported private schools in many ways for all of my professional life. I was president of a private college, and as State Superintendent I'm frequently asked to speak at private schools.

But my main focus is public schools, and for good reason. It is the quality of our public schools that ultimately will determine our quality of life. I don't know about you, but I've never heard of a company considering a move to South Carolina that asked the question, "How good are your private schools?"

That's why I firmly believe that the best choice for South Carolina is S.607. Because it's the only bill that guarantees meaningful choices for students and parents in the only schools that are fully accountable to the public and fully accessible to the public.

"Achievement gaps are growing"

- That's a great example of how voucher lobbyists advance their idea by trashing public schools – and how they cherry-pick data to make their case. While some indicators do show a lack of progress in reducing achievement gaps, other indicators show exactly the opposite. Just last month, for example, a national report released by the Education Trust showed that our state's minority and lower-income students have raised their test scores and reduced achievement gaps on standardized reading and math tests. Education Trust also said that achievement gaps in South Carolina are smaller than the national average.

"Tax credits aren't public funds"

- If public money is not going to be used for tax credits, why do we need legislation?
- Tax credits will shrink the General Fund and take money away from a variety of state programs: public education, health care, law enforcement, etc.

"Research shows that vouchers and tax credits work"

- Another good example of cherry picking only data that makes your case. While some research studies have indicated that voucher programs have produced slight improvements in student achievement, other studies have found no improvement at all. Anyone who claims that "research supports vouchers" isn't telling you the whole story.